



Defining Moments

A cancelled trip to the Far East set off a chain of events that would change *Lizzie Russell* and her husband's future. From holiday woe to business WoW (Women only Weeks), a gender-specific ski company based in the Italian Dolomites.

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There are certain defining moments in life that set in motion a chain of events, or thoughts, which shape one's future in a way that, on reflection, would never have seemed plausible or even possible. These moments are not necessarily any of life's 'big' events, but seemingly banal impulses, haphazard reactions, chance meetings; the missed telephone call, or the one accidentally picked up, the glance across a room, the chance overhearing of a mumbled conversation; in short, a tumble of coincidences that lead your life down a path you had never planned.

Defining moment number one was the telephone call to the travel agent cancelling the five-star Christmas holiday in Thailand that my husband had won as part of a work promotion. I'm not the best of fliers and my three children were still very small. Above all though, Government websites at the time were strongly advising against travel anywhere in the Far East. Part of me knew I was being daft, but I just couldn't bring myself to step on that plane.

You can imagine my husband's molten reception to the cancellation by yours truly and the ensuing three weeks of stony, glacial silence, during which time I scanned maps and holiday options that might in some way make up for our Paradise Lost. Sadly, nothing came close to the waterside lodge, swaying palms and acres of white sand.

My husband had been a keen skier in his youth, and my oldest daughter, then six, was competent, but the thought of all that inhospitable cold hadn't ever really appealed to me, and the very idea of donning two planks of wood and hoping to keep upright and safe on the way down a snowy mountainside seemed to me both horrifying and impossible. But my husband's mood was black. Christmas was coming. I took the plunge and booked a small chalet in a tiny resort in Norway. Defining moment number two.

In what was one of the most wonderful weeks of my life, even at minus 27°C, I began to love this new snowy landscape. In the evening we sledged with our babes to the only pub, watched the ice crystals sparkle across the frozen lake, and snuggled in the cosiest chalet ever, illuminated with tea lights and a huge fire. Every day I noted the exhilaration of my husband and daughter as they came in off the five slopes of the tiny family resort. On day four I cracked. I took a lesson. I learned to put on those pesky ski boots and skis, snow ploughed through the teddy bears on the nursery slopes and took my first *poma* tow through a shimmering landscape. I found myself utterly hooked. My instructor, a young Danish guy, warned me that day: "your first ski holiday will be the most expensive. From then on you'll have to pay for all the others!" He was right. In the following months, and years, grandparents, great

aunts and friends were cajoled into babysitting, as we squeezed in another few days of snow before the end of the season.

Fast forward two years. Big lifestyle change.

Defining moment number three: A bold, impulsive and possibly overly romanticised move to very rural Italy meant olives, sunshine, sunsets and medieval hilltop towns. Art, culture, wine, bilingual kids, lunches in piazzas encircled by stylish Italians, and a whole new winter skiing world within a few hours' drive. I was smitten at once. Italian snow-resort culture is generally friendlier and more laid-back than that of other European resorts. Italians do skiing pretty much like they do everything else – happily, socially, and with the prospect of good dining never too far away. “Go to the Dolomites,” a friend urged, “once you’ve skied there, you’ll never want to ski anywhere else again.” And she was right. Again.

Have you ever skied in the Dolomites? I bet you haven’t. I bet it’s an area you haven’t even considered. And yet the Dolomites are, without question, “heaven on earth”. There are many beautiful places in the world, but there are few that simply take your breath away; miles upon miles of glittering snow, clear blue skies (the South Tirol area east of Bolzano boasts over 300 days of yearly sunshine), and jutting towers of rock, dusted in snow, reflecting pink in the sunlight. These mountains are my secret, and if you ski them they will become your special little secret too.

Defining moment number four was the house we bought: a concrete ruin situated just steps from the piste in the picturesque village of La Villa, one of the six villages comprising the Alta Badia ski area. My arm didn’t need much twisting to be honest; I had already lost my heart to these magnificent mountains. Casa Zilli is the name of our beautiful ski sanctuary, the place we repair to for family re-groupings and our own *settimane bianche* (white weeks in Italian) with the kids. Bliss.

In terms of skiing, there are more than 1,200km of linked pistes over the 12 differing ski areas of the Dolomiti superski area, each with its own distinct character, and all available on one handy ski pass. There is plenty for everyone, whatever your level. From stylish Cortina, to the charm of Alta Badia, fast and furious Kronplatz, horse-drawn ski carriages and James Bond lifts at Lagazuoi; the world of Dolomite skiing is all about enjoyment, rather than simply conquest. You will find perfectly groomed and often empty pistes, the most chic and welcoming mountain huts offering superb-quality Italian gastronomy at decent prices: goodbye over pricing, goodbye plastic trays, goodbye queues. And if it all gets too much, plonk yourself in one of the deck chairs, usually supplied with snuggly blanket and outside fire. Indulge in a *Bombardino* – the local egg nog – guaranteed to put a tiger in your tank.

The Dolomites also offer some of the world’s most outstanding off-piste itineraries. The stalagmite pinnacles of Dolomite geology hide endless seams of snowy canyons simply aching to be skied. The classics of Cortina, the endless powder snowfields at the Marmolada Glacier, and the kingdom of couloirs, the Sella Massif, offering off-pisters of all levels any number of thrilling and challenging descents. A quick Google of The Val Mezdi, Val Scura, Val Litres or Canale Joel will have you reaching for your avalanche transceiver and slinging your ski kit in the car in seconds.

In the evening, if you can cope with the strain, you can pop into any of the numerous spas and enjoy the many beauty treatments available, do some low-key but discerning shopping, linger in those discreet and gorgeously conceived wine bars offering aperitivi and delicious wines of all manner in that quintessential Italian style, or guzzle through pizzeria, grill houses and other hosteleries. Perhaps you may be tempted to try a spot of mountain hut eating and dancing, reached by snowcat through the darkness.

Cue defining moment number five.

Coming off at the top of the main gondola which serves the village of Arabba, there is a sharp descent at a place called Porto Vescovo. It’s a nasty slope, one I’ve never skied well, steep for a red (intermediate) slope, and always littered



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WoW weekends are a great place for skiers of all levels to forge new friendships.



The Dolomites – UNESCO World Heritage site

The site of the Dolomites comprises a mountain range in the northern Italian Alps, numbering 18 peaks which rise to above 3,000 metres and cover 141,903 ha. It features some of the most beautiful mountain landscapes anywhere, with vertical walls, sheer cliffs and a high density of narrow, deep and long valleys. A serial property of nine areas that present a diversity of spectacular landscapes of international significance for geomorphology marked by steeples, pinnacles and rock walls, the site also contains glacial landforms and karst systems.

Above:

Casa Zilli, the “beautiful ski sanctuary”, situated in the village of La Villa.

Left:

Lizzie’s husband, Ker Russell, shows his off-piste prowess.

with fallen skiers and bumps. At the top, a woman was sitting, skis off, sobbing profusely. In between sobs, she was hurling abuse at her partner who was standing some 50 metres below, uselessly coaxing her to re-don her skis and attempt to join him. The woman’s pain and fear was tangible. I empathised with her totally. And that is where my ski business idea started.

Our burgeoning idea blossomed in defining moment number six. Simply entitled WoW! (Women only Weeks), it was born of a recognition that men and women, generally, approach challenges and critical moments of uncertainty very differently. In skiing, more than in most other recreational sports, we believe this difference becomes more acute. Women assess the risks, often too much, and although technically able, need reassurance, approval and that vital ingredient: empathy. Men are more gung-ho, their natural competitiveness and instinctive self-belief allowing them to apparently plunge into the abyss and start thinking about the consequences only half way down. Coupled with their physical power, they seem to succeed where women lag behind.

This year I shall be 50. My husband was 50 last year. Clang Clang! FIFTY. A big number. I don’t feel 50. With any luck, I don’t look 50 either. But it’s a poignant age. For all sorts of reasons, there are many causes to reflect. On one hand, your brood are growing up, moving out and moving on. Your life as principal anchor for your family is almost over. And you? You are left with your partner,

whose life you have criss-crossed in and out of, rarely sharing any quality time together since your kids were born. The secret, my husband has always said, is to have a goal. Neither he nor I have ever wanted to be caught out drifting towards our pension with nothing purposeful to occupy us. Why not then, we both reasoned, combine what we’ve gained from 11 years in Italy, including the language, together with our skiing passion, knowledge and love of the Dolomites, from pistes to pizza, from coffee to couloirs, to offer gender-specific holidays not just for women, but for men too?

So, on the advice of our wonderful banker at Arbutnot Latham, Ross Mitchell, we’ve expanded our holiday range to include both female and male specific weeks, as well as a couples-only week, offering both on and off-piste skiing. Our base will be the beautiful Casa Zilli, a setting that allows for sharing the ups and downs (please excuse the pun) of the day’s skiing over a chinwag and a bottle of wine. We want our home to be the platform for making real connections, lifelong friendships, all brought about through skiing as our common bond.

So, whilst the rest of my extended family may be planning a next day’s hangover and a !SURPRISE! in celebration of my looming birthday, I am hoping my 50th year will be memorable for the lifestyle change that our new business will bring about.

Discovering the Dolomites has been our defining moment, why not make it yours?